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STILL HOME ON THE RANGE



Chris Richards / Arizona Daily Star

Frank Aguirre, left, and Jesus Morgan ready a calf for branding at the Rancho Seco. Pima County has purchased and will preserve 9,553 acres there.

County seals Rancho Seco deal

Pact ensures land will remain open to cattle for years

By Tony Davis
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

ARIVACA — It started with a muffled series of grunts, then slowly built up to a low roar.

Within a few minutes, 75 Hereford and Black Angus bulls, cows and calves had rumbled into a corral, after being driven seven miles by a half-dozen cowpokes on horseback.

That springtime roundup took place last week at Rancho Seco, just

as taxpayers were guaranteeing the land will stay undeveloped, and open to cattle, for at least another 10 years.

On Thursday, Pima County closed on a deal to buy 9,553 acres of the ranch northeast of Arivaca for \$18.5 million.

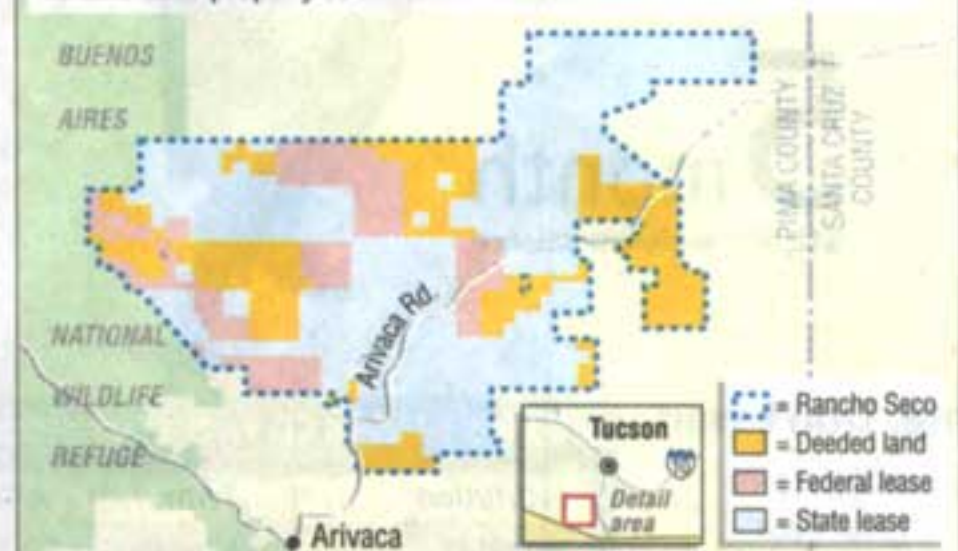
It gives the county its largest-ever open space purchase, and keeps the sellers, the Rowley family, in the ranching business they've run for 54 years.

The ranch is mainly rolling mesquite-covered grasslands and woodlands, offering sharply focused views of Baboquivari Peak to the northeast and of the reddish-brown Cerro Colorado Mountains to the northeast.

The ranch lies nearly 60 miles

Open-space bond purchase

The county Board of Supervisors approved buying 9,553 acres of the Rancho Seco property southwest of Tucson.



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SOURCE: Pima County Department of Transportation

Staff

RANGE

County seals deal to purchase 9,553 acres of ranch land

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southwest of Downtown Tucson. It stretches about 13 miles east to west and eight miles from north to south.

The purchase also gives the county 27,000 acres of federal and state grazing leases, and development rights to another 480 acres of private land that the sellers will keep and have the right to build up to 10 houses on.

The purchase provides an unbroken corridor of publicly owned land from the Sierrita Mountains north of Rancho Seco south to the Mexican border.

That means fertile traveling grounds for coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, javelina and other mammals, reptiles and birds. Mesquite trees and occasional cottonwood, velvet ash and hackberry trees line parts of three major washes coursing through the property.

The purchase also removes the possibility of development of this area.

The Arizona Open Land Trust, which had an option to buy this property for four months before the county's purchase, had been negotiating with the Rowley family to buy it for four years.

In that period, three or four developers had talked to the Rowleys about a possible purchase, said rancher John Rowley and Diana Freshwater, the trust's executive director.

It was not a hard decision to sell to the county instead of a developer, Rowley said Thursday.

"When my parents bought this land, they didn't say 'it's all going to be homesites someday,'"



From left, Frank Aguirre, Raul Lopez, Armando Delgado and Plutarco "Caco" Elias take a breather after rounding up cattle Thursday morning at Rancho Seco, 60 miles southwest of Tucson.

Rowley said. "They bought a cattle ranch and this is keeping the heritage going. Tomorrow, the cattle won't know the difference as to who owns the land."

The ranch will not be a public park, packed with hikers and mountain bikers. The county will restrict public access and will allow little or no new access until it wraps up a management plan in six months.

The reason: The county bought this place to conserve eight vulnerable species that its scientists say stand a good chance of living there, and to preserve the ranching that prompts County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry to call it a "working landscape."

"The rancher has, under our management agreement, the obligation to manage and protect

the land. If you are going to run a working landscape which is a ranch, and it will be done using conservation standards, you can't have unlimited public access," Huckelberry said.

The purchase also does not put an end to development pressure in the Southern Arizona ranch lands south of Tucson. Last week, owners of the 12,000-acre Sopori Ranch met with neighbors in Tubac to outline plans to build about 320 homes on about 1,200 acres of private land west of Interstate 19.

Still, ranchers and environmentalists were thrilled at the Rancho Seco purchase.

"The more open spaces we've got out here, the more I like it," said Don Caswell, former manager of the neighboring Marley ranch who worked for Rancho Seco on last week's roundup. "I don't care for town life out here."

Mammals and birds need to be able to move around for long distances, or they'll never have a good chance at evolving or adapting to changing conditions, said Freshwater, the director of the Open Land Trust.

"Preserving an interconnected system of open landscapes that reach south from Tucson to the Mexico border is crucial for ensuring the long-term survival of Pima County's native plants and animals," said William Shaw, a University of Arizona wildlife ecology professor and chairman of the county's Science and Technical Advisory Team. "This acquisition is a major step towards realizing this vision."

But it raises the question of where people will live, said Plutarco "Caco" Elias, a cowboy working on Thursday's Rancho Seco roundup. "People gotta go somewhere."

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Photos by Chris Richards / Arizona Daily Star

Cowboy Don Caswell keeps an eye on cattle that he and other cowpokes rounded up last week as Pima County closed on a deal to purchase and preserve acreage there. The purchase keeps the sellers in the ranching business they have been in for the last 54 years.